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AUTHOR Hall, Susan E. M.
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ABSTRACT

Using student dictated stories to create class books is an exciting way to teach young children about books and writing. Children can thus use their own material as they learn to read, the books provide a class library, and writing through dictation allows young children to learn about reading and writing before they can read or write--even with invented spelling. This can be done with picture books, story books, sequenced stories, and books using previously printed material. Teachers need to (1) help children learn to dictate, allowing them to watch as it is being written; (2) be sensitive about both their own editing and editing by the children; and (3) encourage children to share the reading of the books with parents. Although class books should not be the only form of dictated writing, they provide a stimulating way for children to learn about literacy and books. (EL)

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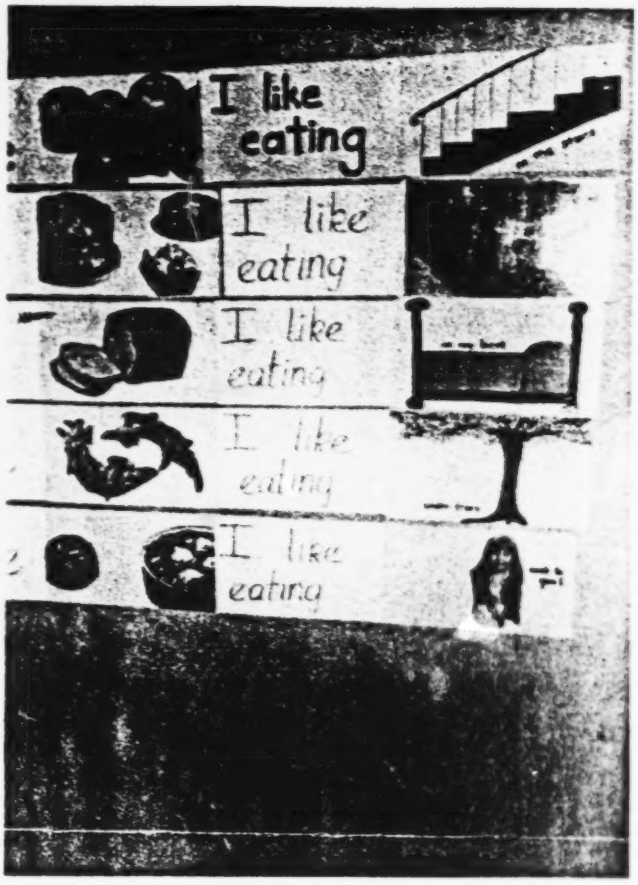

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by Susan E. M. Hall

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An Approach to Dictation with Young Children

By Susan E. M. Hall
Laramie, WY

There are many ways to approach the task of teaching young children about books and writing. Perhaps one of the most exciting is through the use of dictated class books. This approach not only teaches children about writing, it also provides reading material for the classroom. Children can use their own material as a beginning point as they learn to read. Writing through dictation provides a way for young children to gain considerable amounts of information about reading and writing before they are able to read, or even to write with invented spelling.

There are many ways in which a class library can be created and constructed. The various books discussed here are but one approach. All of the book formats discussed here have been used in kindergarten classrooms. The techniques are appropriate to young children whether they have learned to read or not.

Each child contributes a page or a story to the book. When all the pages are completed they are laminated and bound. Often a table of contents is constructed by the teacher for the first page. Children quickly learn to use this to find their own stories. As the stories get longer it may be appropriate to divide the stories and bind them into two books rather than one. This allows twice as many children to look at the stories at the same time and also makes a more manageable book when the teacher is requested to read an entire book.

The books are intended to help children see that oral language is transferred to written language by means of letters and words. Some activities lend themselves better to a particular format and the most appropriate should be used. This is not intended to mean that stories are the only type of writing to be done by children. There are many types of writing and children should be exposed to and allowed to practice as many of them as possible.

PICTURE BOOKS

Creating picture books is an excellent beginning point in the understanding of writing because most young children are more adept at drawing than at writing. To create this type of book the teacher needs to provide a topic of interest and allow the children to draw appropriate pictures. The teacher then takes dictation about the picture or about the subject and writes it on the paper. The words are written where they seem most appropriate. For example, "That's red" should appear next to the red balloon. Initially the dictation tends to be short sentences or one word descriptions. As children become better at explaining and describing, the explanations will invariably become longer. Topics for these books are as wide and varied as the different aspects of classrooms and teachers. "The Space Shuttle Book" was written after watching a televised launch and landing of one of the space shuttles. "The Balloon Book" was created by Albuquerque kindergartners during the annual Balloon

Fiesta when hundreds of hot air balloons floated over the school. "The Dr. Seuss Birthday Book" contained make believe animals which were created the week of March 2nd, in honor of Dr. Seuss. "The Crane Book" was written after spending several days watching a construction crane being assembled near a downtown school.

STORY BOOKS

Books of dictated stories can take several forms. In each case the stories are dictated to the teacher who writes them as they are dictated and later types them for the pages of the books. (A primary typewriter is excellent for this purpose.) It is important to provide a variety of formats for creating the books. Some book formats, which differ primarily in the type of pictures used, are described below.

One format is to have children write about their own drawings. This is different from the picture books because children are asked to write a story which is later typed, rather than placing the short dictation on the page with the picture. Children draw a picture on a specified subject related to a classroom activity. Some topics for consideration might include: My Family, Caterpillars and Butterflies, My Favorite Thing to do at School, What I Did in the Snow, or The Most Exciting Thing I Have Done.

Children will approach the task differently in this variation on dictated stories with children's own drawings. The stories are dictated before the pictures are drawn. A book created for the birthday of Winnie-the-Pooh is an excellent example of this type of book. For Pooh's birthday (October 14) children brought their favorite bear to school. Part of the day's activities included time for each child to talk about the bear. The information they provided was written down by a teacher and later the pages were given to the children so they could draw a picture of their bear.

Another type of dictated story book uses pictures from other sources. The children are provided with pictures and asked to write a story about what is happening in the picture. Magazine pictures may be used, but many young children respond better to drawings which can be copied for this purpose. Some children assume they cannot write about a photograph because there is a right and wrong answer to what is happening. Using drawings also provides for the possibility of providing each child with a different picture on a single theme. For example, "The Turtle and Rabbit Book" was created as children wrote about a variety of pictures copied from different versions of "The Tortoise and the Hare." The pictures are then glued to the pages along with the story to make the book.

HELPING CHILDREN DICTATE A STORY

One reason to encourage children to write complete stories involves teaching them that a story has a beginning, a middle and an end. Nearly all the reading that is done in the primary grades involves stories. It makes sense that children will find reading easier if they understand the schema of a story. When reading to young children it is possible to discuss this schema, but a child who can use the format to dictate a story is demonstrating an understanding of beginning, middle and end.

One approach to helping children

write with this story schema is to ask for three descriptions as they begin to write. "Tell me what is happening in the picture" will usually elicit the middle part of the story. "Tell me what happened before the picture" usually creates the beginning. "Tell me what happened after the picture" usually brings about a conclusion. When the story is read back to the child the teacher must explain the order in which it is being read and add a transition sentence if necessary.

As children begin to understand how the process works they will begin to tell complete stories in the correct order. Teachers may need to ask additional, non-threatening questions to get a complete story. These would include, "What happened next?," "How did he get down from the tree?," "Who was following him?," "Where was the turtle going?," "Why did he want to get in the water?." If the questions are asked by an interested teacher, the children will usually respond in a way that adds to the story.

Sometimes children begin to ramble about something the picture reminds them of. The teacher may need to ask if that should be written down. Children who do this sort of rambling soon learn to tell the teacher if what they are saying is to be written or if they are just talking.

Occasionally a teacher will encounter children who have so much difficulty thinking of something to say about any picture it is impossible for them to write more than a sentence or two. Sometimes these children can write together in groups of two or three and author a communal story. They tend to be encouraged by having others contribute, and the idea of storytelling will begin to make more sense to them. The problem with this technique is that occasionally children have very different ideas about what is happening in the picture. When this occurs, they can each write an individual story with contributions from others in the group.

SEQUENCED STORIES

A more elaborate version of dictated stories with pictures is accomplished by adding sequencing skills to the pictures as well as the words. This technique creates exciting reading and pictures, but children need some experience with dictated story telling before attempting it. This is also a technique which lends itself well to creating individual books. These can be done with pictures drawn by the children or with pictures from other sources.

Four or five panels from "Peanuts" provide excellent material because children are usually familiar with the characters and because they can often be found with no words in the frames. Children may color the pictures, cut them apart and glue them in sequence on separate pages. They then dictate a story that involves all of the frames. If the child can tell a coherent story it does not matter if the frames are in the original order.

To have children sequence pictures of their own, it is best to start with the dictated story. Once the story is complete children need to determine how many pictures they will need and what they should be. When using this approach to dictated stories it may be necessary to impose one rule to help the teacher maintain her sanity when typing the stories. The children must draw the pictures in the order of the story and specify which words of the

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story should appear with each picture.

Sequencing several pictures to a story often involves children in their own editing of both pictures and story. One child changed her story about a hundred butterflies to two butterflies after deciding that two butterflies looked best in her picture. Another child changed a story about a bear to one about a monster after discovering he didn't like the way he drew bears.

Children also apply the knowledge they have learned from reading and looking at books to this project. Andrew drew two pictures about a lost caterpillar. Both drawings were similar except for the direction the caterpillar was going--and the length of his fur. Andrew noted that the caterpillar had been lost so long his fur grew. When asked if he would like to include that in the story he replied, "People can just look at the pictures. In real books they don't always write everything about the picture." He went on to cite specific examples from books he knew well.

BOOKS ABOUT THE FAMILIAR

Another variation for making class books involves the use of previously printed material. Children can demonstrate a clear understanding of short poems, songs or Mother Goose rhymes by providing the illustrations. To create this type of picture book children select what they wish to illustrate, draw the picture and the teacher types or writes the words on the page. Children may also wish to dictate explanations about their drawings.

A variation which involves more use of writing is to have children rewrite a story they already know. Fairy tales are particularly good for this activity. Often the tales are worthy of publication as much for what has been left out as for what has been included. Children could then illustrate their stories, including short dictation about the pictures if desired.

AUTHOR PICTURES

One group of children wanted to know why "real books" sometimes had pictures of the authors on the back covers but there were never any pictures of them in their books. The teacher considered that to be a wonderful observation and decided to do something about it with the next book. All the children posed for a picture and then composed a few sentences about themselves for the back of the book. Unfortunately, this becomes too expensive for every book.

WATCHING DICTATION

It is important that children watch the dictation as it is being written. A great deal of indirect teaching and learning takes place during this time. One child had used the word "He" many times as the beginning of short sentences. The H's were lined up along the left-hand side of the page. The child studied this for a moment then asked, "Why are all those H's there?" The teacher reread the story and showed the child where each "He" was written with a capital H. One kindergarten teacher wrote capital T's so they closely resembled 7's when she was in a hurry to keep up with the speed of the speaker. A child looked at this and demanded to know why all those 7's were there when she had never said that number. When it was explained, the child then went through the dictated page and corrected all the 7's to T's.

CHILD EDITING

Some children will begin to learn about the editing process through dictated stories. Part of their editing is immediate, where the child will ask the teacher to "cross that out." Then they will replace the line just spoken with another. Some children will edit on their own when the story is read back to them. One of the most common forms of this type of editing is when a character has been referred to by different names or by two genders. If the child does not catch this error it is important for the teacher to note it and ask the child what should be done. A few children will do more serious editing by removing complete sentences, by adding more about a specific incident or by changing the order of the story.

With some children it is more appropriate to ask questions when the story is read back rather than during the dictation process. Some children need questions to keep the story flowing. Other children have no difficulty with the flow of the story but leave the reader dangling at an exciting point. For these children a question such as, "I want to know what happened. Can you write about that?," is very appropriate. Usually children will agree to add more to the story.

TEACHER EDITING

Teacher editing of children's stories is a controversial topic. Some teachers believe it should never be done under any circumstances. I have reached a compromise with myself and my students regarding the matter of editing. One of the things young children need to know is that there is a literate language used in books that is not always the way children talk. When the stories are read back they need to contain some of this literate language. To this end some editing is done. The first type of teacher editing I do is to eliminate some run-on sentences that make stories difficult to read. It is possible, with the use of "and," to dictate an entire story that is really one sentence. In these cases some of the "and's" are removed and replaced with periods. The second form of teacher editing I do is to change some of the child dialect wording. The most common of these is to change "he gots a cat" to "he has a cat." As children develop an awareness of the language used in books I ask children which they think should be written. Usually, but not always, it is the more literate choice. Part of the compromise I have reached involves where this editing is done. When children dictate stories the corrections are made. When they are dictating onto a picture, as in the picture books, they are not made unless the child agrees to the change.

SHARING WITH PARENTS

It is important that parents share in the reading of the finished books. Parents generally enjoy the stories and are as capable as the teacher when it comes to observing progress in the ability to compose a story. There are several ways to share the completed work with parents. For parents to be able to share the entire completed books a check-out system needs to be developed so children can take the books home over night. Many parents like to keep records of what their children are doing in school. Typing the stories onto ditto masters and making a copy of all the stories for each child is a way for parents to keep copies of the stories that are

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written. This method makes it difficult to share the pictures, but used in combination with a check-out plan, works reasonably well. It is time consuming to retype the stories, but well worth the time and effort as parents enjoy the stories and wait for each new book to appear. Access to a word processor makes it possible to type the stories into the book and also onto dittos with only one typing. It may even be possible to find a parent who is willing to type copies of the stories.

CONCLUSIONS

Making books for a classroom library provides a way to learn a variety of skills. Children can illustrate the familiar, and rewrite stories they know well. This provides the teacher with a means to evaluate what the individual children within the class have gained from a particular unit. Children can draw pictures to accompany activities in the classroom. This provides a record of some previous activities for later in the year. As children dictate information about the pictures they are also gaining understanding about how oral language is transferred to written language. Dictating with a story format, using a variety of techniques to obtain the illustrations, allows children to practice what they know about the form a story takes. If a table of contents is used at the beginning of the books, children gain information regarding its use. Above all, children are acquiring knowledge of how books come into being. Children who have written all or part of a book are well aware that books have authors. These children will begin to demand information about the author of other books read in the classroom. While class books should not be the only form of dictated writing used in any classroom, they provide a fun way for children to indirectly learn a great deal about literacy and books before they have learned to read.

Susan Hall is a former kindergarten teacher now residing in Laramie, Wyoming.